

Texans future rides on water politics  
OPINION Columnist  
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Wrong calls on reservoirs would leave us high and dry

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About 20 minutes north of Mount Pleasant, you'll find a bumpy, unpaved county road that takes you into the heart of one of Texas' great water disputes. The proposed Marvin Nichols Reservoir site lies alongside the pothole-filled road, which curves through acres of private, impenetrable hardwoods until it finally comes upon the Sulphur River.

Downstream from a graffiti-covered bridge is where the Sulphur would be dammed to form the Marvin Nichols. About 20 percent of the reservoir's water would supply Northeast Texas communities like Clarksville; 80 percent would supply the Dallas-Fort Worth region.

If it's ever built, that is.

The Marvin Nichols is front and center in the bitter dispute playing out in Austin about our state's water policy. The Senate passed a really good bill that would encourage conservation, determine how much water rivers need to maintain their flows and identify 19 new reservoir sites, including the Marvin Nichols.

But just as happened two years ago, the Senate's major water bill hit its own bumpy road in the House. The House Natural Resources Committee tacked on amendments to SB 3 last week that could make it unlikely, if not impossible, to build new reservoirs.

For example, the Texas Farm Bureau got the bill amended to include extra "encumbrance" fees. Landowners in reservoir sites would get paid beyond the fair market value the state would automatically give them for their land.

The amended bill also strips out four proposed reservoirs. That includes the Marvin Nichols and Lake Fastrill, both of which North Texas is counting on to supply the 16-county region's projected 13 million residents in another 50 years.

Some perspective here may underscore just how important the Marvin Nichols is to the state and North Texas. It would generate about a third of the water planned for all Texas reservoirs. It also would supply North Texas with about a quarter to half of its water needs over the next 50 years.

Take it out of the plan, and you leave a gaping hole that conservation alone could never fill. Only more costly projects – and probably lots of them – could make up the difference.

Complicating this is a wicked set of politics. A triumvirate of farmers, timber interests and environmentalists don't want new lakes, and they have a toehold in the House. Hence, the amendments in the House committee last week.

The question is, will House Speaker Tom Craddick get the reservoir debate off dead center? He reportedly is working to keep alive the chance for new lakes, but his options are increasingly limited.

His best choice would be to persuade the House to put the reservoirs back into the bill and get rid of the tie-'em-ups that would stop reservoir building. If he can't do that, he could pass a bill that simply designates 19 new reservoir sites. That could be married up later with bills the House already passed to encourage conservation and assess rivers' needs.

If he can't do that, it's time for Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst to play hardball. His Senate has done right by Texans by including the reservoirs in its water legislation. If the House doesn't understand our needs, Mr. Dewhurst should hold up those other water bills the House has passed. Maybe that will get the House's attention.

Hardball isn't a preferred option, but Texas is looking at serious shortages. Demand for water will increase 12 percent by 2020 and 27 percent by 2060. Meanwhile, current supplies will decrease 6 percent by 2020 and 18 percent by 2060.

Bottom line: Do nothing, and we're way short of water. There's a human consequence to that failure, but also an economic one.

While bouncing along the Marvin Nichols site, Clarksville Mayor Ann Rushing told me how her town has lost about half its population, largely because it relies on well water. And there isn't enough of a good water supply, she laments, to keep people living there.

Now imagine that all of Texas faced the Clarksville example. This is why Mr. Craddick and Mr. Dewhurst have a duty as stewards of the state to find a solution.

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